

### Some Notes regarding the Psychological Distress Questions (assignments 8 and 14)

Perhaps more of you realize now that I had hoped you would perceive a relationship between the discussion in lecture of physical pain and its possible and probable functions and assignment #8 about psychological distress (read: "mental pain"?). I had hoped you might see, with some reflection, that both the sociobiologist and the psychologist might be missing something, and that you might as a result be able to explain things to your Aunt Ethel and Uncle Fred at a higher level than my (deliberately) rather protracted and inconclusive description of the contradictory results and disagreements given in the hypothetical situation I discussed for you. I wanted to give you a chance to show that you could "back off" from a controversy or question and establish a connection between it and other problems we might have discussed, and then deal with the new question in the light of that other parallel problem. I wasn't trying to slip something past you, but to elicit from you a demonstration of ability to see connections, to generalize, that would have made me feel really good. Unfortunately (sob), not many of you saw any connection. So that's why I asked the question in assignment #14 last time. Although I gave most of you "okay" grades on #8, there was nearly always a "but" after that okay. I am going to use your answers to #14 to give you full grades for #8.

Here are some hasty notes that might help you see how I am asking you to think about this.

What might be the function (reproductive significance) of physical pain? How can thinking about that help us understand the variations and distributions of unusually acute pain and absence of pain?

Some possibilities:

1. Pain helps us avoid repetitions of damage-causing incidents
  - a. we keep on remembering the pain and the associated situation
  - b. we avoid the cause of the pain
  - c. we review the incident repeatedly until (?) we arrive at some kind of assurance that the next time we will be able to avoid the difficulty we suffered last time (?)
2. Pain helps us prevent further damage once damage has occurred
  - a. it causes us to withdraw from causes of injury (jerk back our hand from the hot stove)
  - b. it helps us protect injured parts until they heal
    - (1) we protect hurting parts from further damage
    - (2) we protect hurting parts from infection

What parts (then) might we predict not to hurt when damaged?

1. those impervious to injury (no history of injury, no history of healing)
2. those that cannot be repaired (no history of healing, no function for pain)

(No gain, no pain???)

Notice that one can ask parallel questions about pleasure. Neither pain nor pleasure just "happens." They're not profitably regarded as simply "givens" about which questions about function need not be asked.

Now what about "mental pain"? (I deliberately used the phrase "psychological distress," wanting you to make the connection; I guess didn't need to be so subtle!) Those few of you who even mentioned or hinted at function simply assumed that the function is something like "enabling us to cope." One could ask: why have psychological distress at all? What is it helping us to cope with? To what extent does it seem that it's the psychological distress itself that we have to "cope with"? I am not trying to discuss this topic thoroughly but rather to get you to think about it in a way that will enable you to discuss it

thoroughly. I want you to be able to do this yourself, without my participation. That's the point of the course. . .

Is something really injured? Or is psychological distress just a signal, paralleling, say, a reaction to an unpleasant odor which tells us to avoid a place or situation or danger? Is it a signal to protect something until it heals or a signal to avoid repetition? Both? Neither? How might we decide? Does it include repetitive reviews of the situation causing the distress? In this context, think of how you review situations in which you perceived that you made a fool of yourself -- I know that I seem to review them until I get the impression that I have described to myself how I "should" have behaved in that situation, and sometimes I seem even to convince myself that I did (!) behave that way, and maybe I really didn't have to feel embarrassed at all! And then I seem to let it all fade out of my consciousness . . . Think of how you review an incident involving an accident to yourself or someone else that you know -- or just an accident that happened in your vicinity (accidents can cause deaths, after all). Do you seem to be saying to yourself "If only I hadn't . . ." or: "If ever that happens again (to me), I will . . ." Does mental "pain" ever lead to such reviews and modifications? Can you imagine situations involving losses of persons close to us that would elicit quite different kinds of psychological distress -- for example, if the loss was a result of carelessness on your part in, say, an everyday (i.e., repeated) activity; or, on the other hand, it could have involved some force over which you had absolutely no control whatever and which might never be repeated.

Here is an additional point:

Psychological distress seems to involve group responses as well as individual personal private feelings. Do we use it (external evidence of mental distress, sadness, mourning, etc.) to prove to friends and associates that social intimacy means something to us (we reveal losses, talk about them, wear black, etc.). Are we sometimes inviting others to help us in a time of need, reminding them that debts are still outstanding despite (say) death of the one to whom they (literally) were owed? Are we sometimes reminding others that our losses might have been incurred in their interests (e.g., when we mourn a relative lost in war)? Are we sometimes also notifying others that we are candidates for a new form of relationship (e.g., we are still there despite loss of a relative or spouse or friend who previously might have been the principal intermediary between ourselves and the other persons that might be targets of social aspects of evidence of psychological distress)? What do the group aspects have to do with the seemingly personal private aspects? What is the significance of long-term public mourning? Of funerals and other seremonies associated with deaths? Consider this when you watch the film about New Guinea people and the rituals and mourning associated with deaths from intergroup aggression.

Some of you discussed the sequences of emotions that grieving or distressed persons have been described by psychologists as going through. These are feelings such as denial, anger, withdrawal, depression, mourning, etc. How might such observed sequences fit with (or be used by people investigating) questions about possible evolved (adaptive) function(s)?

These are merely suggestions to set you thinking with regard not only to assignment #14 but as well future abilities and tendencies to see possible relationships and parallels between seemingly different phenomena. You might also wish to look up words like pleasure and pain and such like in the texts (e.g., try 110 ff. and 206 ff. in BMS). You can profit by trying that with most questions.